

June 7, 2021 | By Charise Reynolds

Former Middletown Librarian Named as Middletown Days Pioneer



Gehlen Palmer

Gehlen Palmer, longtime resident and former Middletown Librarian is this year's Middletown Days Pioneer award recipient. Palmer didn't set out to be a librarian, he originally wanted to go into science, but, "Math," he says, "was the issue." Born in 1947 in San Francisco, his formative years were spent around his father's family who were readers and former teachers. He recalls driving his grandmother nuts by asking her to read *Ferdinand*, and Dr. Seuss's *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* over and over again.

The family moved to Middletown in June of 1953, right after he finished Kindergarten. His mom, Dorothy Rees, was a housewife and charter member of the Lioness Club. His father, Reis "Finney" Palmer, was a charter member of the Lion's Club. He was also the milk man and owned the Golden State Foremost Dairy which is now known as Clover Dairy.

Palmer attended Middletown Elementary which at the time was located on Hwy 175; and Middletown High back with the middle school and high school were still one. His favorite teacher was Dave Robertson, the English teacher. They talked about books. The high school had just gotten a new library on campus. Palmer recalls typing up the check out cards during Study Hall.

After graduating high school in 1965, he headed to Humboldt State to study Liberal Arts. Then in 1967, in order to avoid being drafted and having to go to Vietnam, he joined the Coast Guard. He was eventually sent to Indianapolis where he attended the Defense Department Journalism School. His last duty station was Governors Island in the middle of New York Harbor where the USO would give service men free tickets to Broadway shows. He ended his time with the Coast Guard 5 years later as an E5 Second Class Journalist.

Next, he headed off to Tampa and General Telephone and Electronics Services where he was a technical writer for 2 years before heading back to California, specifically, Monterey. In 1975 he began what he calls “working in the book business.” He was a book clerk at the Navy Exchange bookstore at the Naval Postgraduate school by day and worked for the Pacifica Grove Public Library in the evening. One day, he saw an ad for a bookstore manager in Astoria, Oregon and he packed up and moved. He held that job for the next three years before deciding to run his own bookstore. He had the store for 11 years, but when his mother died in 1993 (his dad having passed in 1978), he moved back to Middletown.

He gave himself 6 months to find a job. One day he went into the local library and overheard the librarian lamenting that she only had two days left; hadn’t received very many applications; and, of those received, not many were qualified. Palmer put in his application and three weeks later he was the new librarian. At that time, the position was considered Extra Help and only 15 hours a week.

The old Middletown Library used to be housed across the street from the current library in what is now the Gibson Museum. If you had ever visited prior to construction of the new one, you know just how crowded it eventually became. There were stacks and stacks of books behind the counter because there was nowhere else to put them. In addition to his librarian duties, Palmer, the sole employee, also served as janitor and grounds keeper for many years. He says he enjoyed the position and there was lots of work to be done, so he stayed to do it. In 2000, as part of a class and comp study by the county, he was rewarded for his efforts. He received the largest raise of anyone in the county based on all the jobs he was covering. His hours were also increased. He said that he gave himself a “small raise” and put the rest away for retirement.

That same year a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation allowed the library to offer public access computers. That resulted in a conversion of an empty room into a Children's Room. The responsibility was left to Palmer who partnered with the local Lioness Club to fundraise and to paint it. They also helped with the forming of the Friends of the Library.

Even with all the upgrades, the Gibson building eventually became too small to meet the needs. Planning for the new library actually began back in 1997 under Supervisor Ed Robey. The RFP (Request for Proposal) didn't actually go out until around 2010. Palmer thinks it was under Supervisor Jim Comstock. The County Librarian, Susan Clayton, gave Palmer leeway to work in helping to plan the new building. Palmer also helped to relay requests from library patrons as to what they would like in the new building. "That got us the donation of the Circulation Desk from Calpine (the reception desk in the Visitor's Center) and the transfer of custom shelving from the Gibson Children's Room to the new library." Palmer credits many individuals with help planning.

In April of 2013, the efforts of so many came to fruition and the new library was opened. Palmer got to enjoy the new building until he retired in November of 2018. It should be noted that when he retired the position was still not full time at just 30 hours a week. Which, he says, gave him more time at home and to do the things he wanted to do.

These days, he still has lots to do around his house as he is one of the folks who lost his home in the Valley Fire. He is enjoying his retirement and his new home, especially the back porch which has a great view of Cobb Mountain. He calls the porch a "terrible distraction."

Palmer will be featured at the Middletown Days Parade this year which starts at 10 am on Saturday, June 19th. He will also be honored for his contributions to the community with a plaque, immediately following the parade, at the celebration near the arena at Central Park.